Introduction

You know the place. Every small town has one. The place your parents warned you about, where you’re never supposed to go. The abandoned mill out by the rail bridge. The mental hospital up on the hill, now silent and shuttered. The last house on the left at the end of the block. In our town, it was the old Walker place out on Marsden Road.

And, of course, we went. It was the summer of 1984, the last time I slept a whole night through.

The Walker place had been deserted long before any of us were born. As far back as we could remember, there were two signs hung on the gate with baling wire. One said, “For Sale,” the other, “Keep Out.” Mom said it was because old man Walker had been crazy, and dug wells all over the place, and we could fall in and die. “You’d be like one of them milk-carton kids,” she said, lighting up another Marlboro. I don’t know. Maybe that was it. Maybe it was something else. By the end of school that year, though, when we all got out of grade seven, we knew: We were going to the old Walker place.

The day we rode out there was like any other summer day. We all met up at the school and started out. Jerry was on his new ten-speed, the one his parents got him from Happy’s for passing seventh grade. I’d saved all winter and just put new tires on my BMX. Knobbies, for better traction. Kelsey had borrowed her brother’s bike. I always wondered if he knew.

As always, we talked about what we thought happened. “Baby sacrifice,” Jerry said, laughing like he knew everything. He always talked like he knew everything. “Nah,” I said, “it’s just murder. Mom says old man Walker killed his whole family one night. Said he went crazy ‘cause they were taking his farm.”

“No!” Jerry insisted, “he didn’t kill them, he sacrificed them. That’s how he got to keep the farm so long. He made a deal with the Devil, that’s what Matt’s dad says.” Matt’s a PK, a preacher’s kid. We don’t go to his church—most of us are Catholic—but we let him hang around sometimes. He wasn’t there that day, though.
“You’re so full of shit,” Kelsey said, leaning on the handlebars of her bike when we stopped for a rest. She was the oldest, by a few months, and the tallest, and the smartest.

I miss her.

From the gravel shoulder off Marsden Road, it looked like any other abandoned farm. There were enough of them around. Yard overgrown with weeds and volunteer wheat, an old disc harrow rusting by the side of the drive shed. The sort of thing photographers from the city came and took pictures of, to document something our parents called “the crisis.”

Others had been here before us. Older kids mostly, come out here to drink or smoke, maybe do other things. They’d left their mark, painting their courage on the derelict walls with spray cans. Bobby Maxwell was here on one side of the garage. Fuk you, Jason on the other, with what might have been a drawing of a bloody machete. We’d all seen the movies. “See,” Jerry said, pointing at an upside-down star painted in red on the sagging boards of the porch, “that’s a Satan symbol.” Kelsey just curled her lip and cupped her hands around her eyes, trying to see in through the grimy glass of the front window.

The creepiest, though, was right over the door. A single word.

Don’t.

We thought the door would be locked, but it wasn’t. Mark pushed and it swung inward on rusty, squealing hinges. He went in first. Mark never said much, but he was the strongest and he always went in first. We watched as he took a few steps into the narrow foyer. “It’s fine,” he said. We crowded in behind him. The light was dim and the air smelled of mold and damp and bird shit. Some furniture was still there, but it was all falling apart too.

“Jesus,” Jerry said, “wouldja look at this place?” We moved along into the living room, our flashlights cutting through the dust, but not really giving us much light. I smacked mine on my palm and wished I’d thought to look for fresh batteries. I heard a creak and turned my head as Kelsey started up the stairs to the second floor. I was just about to warn her, when Mark spoke again, this time louder.

“Who shut the door?” he asked.

* * *
Throughout history, we have embedded the most powerful products of our imagination in narrative. When things come to us in the form of a legend, a parable, a fable, or even a local ghost story, we remember them more easily and pass them on more eagerly to friends and family. This is true not only of scary stories, but also of religious myths, the tales of faith in which we are often most deeply invested. Indeed, rather than seemingly endless lists of rules, directives, and prohibitions, religious belief has evolved principally through shared storytelling. At some point, one ancient Mesopotamian said to another, “Hey, tell us about Gilgamesh again,” and our earliest recorded creation myth was passed around the campfire once more. Fifteen centuries later, the Greek poet Hesiod gathered the tales of the gods into his *Theogony*, one of our first attempts at a systematic cosmology. A thousand years after that, followers of a Nazarene peasant began weaving stories together that gradually became the Gospels of Jesus Christ. It seems that, as a species, we are addicted to narrative, and wherever our questions of deepest meaning began—a sudden awareness of the difference of death, an existential dread roused by the sheer weight of the stars—we have always couched our answers, the certainty of our religious imaginings, in story.¹

For more than twenty-five years, Cedar Creek’s Trinity Church has mounted a massive, Christian-themed alternative to the traditional Halloween haunted house. Using its version of the “old Walker place out on Marsden Road,” this fundamentalist congregation southeast of Austin, Texas, presents its vision of the relationship between humankind and the divine, between the seen and the unseen orders of reality.² As long lines of visitors tour the house, culturally relevant vignettes tell a series of short stories. A young man suffering with AIDS refuses to repent of his “homosexual lifestyle” and accept Jesus as his savior. When he dies, a pair of cackling demons drag him away. Bleeding to death after taking RU-486, the so-called morning-after pill, a young girl screams, “Jesus save me!” moments before she dies. Suddenly, an angel appears in the room, imperiously warding off the Devil’s minions come to claim her soul. Over the years, tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands of people have witnessed the Hell House performance. In doing so, they have experienced the stories through which Trinity Church answers questions of meaning and significance, or, as Douglas Adams put it, questions of
life, the universe, and everything. Not everyone agrees with their answers, but that isn’t the point. It’s the questions that matter.

Week in and week out, sermons without number lay the consequences of sin before the Christian faithful. What makes Hell House different is story. These devout believers present their theology, their god-talk, through imagination and performance, every part of which says to visitors, “under the right set of circumstances, this could happen” to you, so choose wisely. Indeed, a regular contributor to Trinity’s annual production claims that he doesn’t really understand much about theology. He just “knows the Bible is true,” that “Jesus died for my sins,” and that the stories presented in Hell House are God’s way of reaching out to the lost. Because the notion of “theology” has become mystified over time, however, as though only certain people are qualified to do it, this man doesn’t realize just how much theology, how much god-talk, is actually happening in these few words. However complex Christian fundamentalists want to make it appear, their theology, which is nothing more or less than their understanding of how the seen and the unseen orders of reality relate to each other, is not much more complicated than he describes. Making no apologies for their religious beliefs, members of the Trinity Hell House team don’t pretend to explore issues in depth or to present alternative viewpoints. That’s not the object of the exercise. For them, their Hell House storytelling leads only and always to what they consider The Answer.

Not so with the work of Stephen King.

As “America’s dark theologian,” for more than four decades King has raised the same questions of meaning and existence in his horror fiction. His work only rarely offers anything like a solid answer, though. “I didn’t want to write about answers,” he tells his readers in Just after Sunset, “I wanted to write about questions.” From short fiction such as “Children of the Corn” and “N.” to “That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is in French,” from novels such as The Stand, It, and Pet Sematary to Insomnia, Desperation, and Duma Key, his storyworlds continually probe the same issues the good people of Trinity Church claim to have settled. It is this questioning through story that places his work alongside religion in the long history of human inquiry and imagination. More often than not, King’s “scary stories” contest religious certainties and challenge the limited ways we grapple with our place in the unknowable and the un-
seen. “Each answer remains in force as an answer,” wrote philosopher Martin Heidegger in “The Origins of the Work of Art,” “only as long as it is rooted in questioning.” An answer is an answer only so long as we continue to ask the questions. For Stephen King, when it comes to issues of ultimate meaning, “only fiction can approach answers to those questions. Only *through* fiction can we think about the unthinkable, and perhaps obtain some kind of closure.” Indeed, as writer Gordie La-Chance says in King’s novella “The Body,” “the only two useful artforms are religion and stories.”

In this respect, like that of myriad other horror writers, King’s work is not that different from stories that have become classics of religious mythology. Forerunner legends, ghost stories, spooky tales, and the like all offer their own form of “god-talk.” They invite us to consider the questions that matter most, but they do so outside the bounds of formal religious institutions. “A good horror story,” King writes in *Danse Macabre*, which still stands as one of the most useful histories of the genre, “is one that functions on a symbolic level, using fictional (and sometimes supernatural) events to help us understand our own deepest fears.”

Scholars from a variety of disciplines argue that the human experience of religion began with fear, particularly our awareness of death. Others have noted that religious mythology worldwide is replete with both monsters and monstrosity, the vocabulary we use to give voice to our fears. More than any other genre, with the possible exception of science fiction, this connection makes the horror story religion’s conceptual and cultural sibling, often asking the same questions as religion while challenging religion’s answers to them.

Considering such works as *Carrie*, *The Dead Zone*, *The Shining*, and *Under the Dome*, this book asks what the novels and short fiction of one of the acknowledged masters of modern horror can tell us about the religious imagination. “Some of horror’s current popularity,” King told interviewers and audiences early in his career, “has to do with the failure of religion.” His comment, though, begs the question, failure at what? Failure to do what? King describes himself as a “fallen-away Methodist” and his wife, Tabitha, as “a fallen-away Catholic.” They are a modern man and woman for whom the answers provided by their respective churches no longer hold much significance. All of which is to say, yes,
for millions of people like Stephen and Tabitha King, religion has failed to provide meaningful answers—sometimes spectacularly so. But the questions have not disappeared. The fears and anxieties, the profound ambivalence with which we regard the world—these remain. The existential crises haunting humankind since our minds first developed the capacity to wonder about life are not resolved simply because many of us now realize that children's stories about a talking snake or a boat carrying two kinds of everything are not sufficient for adults.

Who are we? is not answered with a catalog of social roles or a recitation of scriptural pieties. How did we get here? might be explained in strict biological terms, but to avoid existentialist despair we crave something more than that. What is the purpose of our existence, the meaning of life? Because we are both self- and other-centered, because we have strong instincts both for self-preservation and for the protection of the group, we wonder at the heart of it all, Do we matter?

Although, by cultural convention and social dominance, we have tended to label these kinds of questions religious, they are not. For millennia, they have been both relegated to and co-opted by that part of our life experience we call “religion,” but they are not religious questions per se. Instead, we should more appropriately consider them human questions, wonderings and inquiries universal to our species, and to which horror writers such as Stephen King return over and over. They belong to us as a function of our humanity, not our participation in this belief system or that. Put simply, questions of meaning and purpose, suffering and justice, existence and extinction, even truth and beauty—these are all properly human questions.

As we will see, storytelling in popular culture is not only a fitting way to consider key questions and concepts ordinarily associated with “religion,” it is often a more useful and more elegant way to engage these topics. Reviewers and critics commonly hold up The Stand as King's most obvious (or even his singular) “religious” novel, or they point out in passing that Carrie features a fundamentalist Christian as a principal character. What they rarely note, however, and what no one has considered in any serious way, is the depth to which religious imagery, themes, characters, contexts, and problems inform the range of King's horror fiction. In fact, a great many of his novels and short stories not only treat
these topics in compelling and sophisticated ways, but also place religious questions center-stage in his many and varied storyworlds.

Fair Warning: Religion and the Scary Story

This book, it should be noted, is not about “horror as religion,” and King himself proposes no particular “dark theology,” no unified vision of the relationship between the seen and the unseen order. Nowhere does he suggest, “This is how it is” or “how it should be,” as though diligent readers could piece together a systematic theology from scattered fragments of his novels and short stories. King’s horror fiction contains no counterpart, for instance, to the Cthulhu mythos that legions of H. P. Lovecraft’s fans have assembled in the decades since his death. Although Stephen King’s storyworlds, thematic approaches, and plotlines live with each other in a kind of loose connection—most notably through the Castle Rock novels and what I call the Derry cycle—they invite no equivalent attempt to create a coherent or consistent theology. Rather, his novels and short stories continually confront the answers we have been given and often hold to as gospel.

Neither is this “horror in place of religion,” as though, as many critics argue, scary stories somehow function as stealth arguments for secularization. Certainly, few of King’s overtly religious characters come off well, but his myriad dark wonderings are not meant to reflect the end of religious belief as we know it. Indeed, quite the opposite. Rather than secularization, horror stories regularly reveal “an overwhelming ambivalence toward the religious traditions, beliefs, practices, and mythistories by which we are confronted, in which we are often still deeply invested, which we are distinctly unwilling to relinquish, and which we just as often only minimally understand.” Though his characters and plotlines regularly comment on recognizable religious belief, King’s stories consistently question the limited and provincial ways we understand the unseen order and our relationship to it.

Our society is, for all practical purposes, religiously illiterate. For many of us, if we know anything about religion at all, it tends to be that razor-thin slice of the religious spectrum we call our own—and then, perhaps not even that very well. “The paradox is this,” writes religious
studies scholar Stephen Prothero: “Americans are both deeply religious and profoundly ignorant about religion. They are Protestants who can’t name the four Gospels, Catholics who can’t name the seven sacraments, and Jews who can’t name the five books of Moses.”

This phenomenon does not suggest that Americans are not devout, that tens of millions do not remain deeply committed to religious faith as a bedrock principle in both their personal lives and larger society. Indeed, according to the Pew Research Center, slightly more than half of Americans say that religion is “very important” in their lives, and this number rises to nearly 80 percent when we include those who respond that religion is “somewhat important” to them. While “the share of U.S. adults who say they believe in God” has declined slightly in recent years, Pew researchers point out that this number is “still remarkably high by comparison with other advanced industrial countries.” As we will see, many of these believers regularly haunt the pages of King’s storyworlds.

Yet Prothero is not wrong. Devotion to one’s faith does not necessarily equate to a depth of knowledge about it or an ability to recognize when that faith is being represented. And, if he’s right, and we know so little about our own religions, how much less do we know about the faith traditions of others? Put differently, more often than not we reduce “religion” to what we most readily and easily recognize as religion, and are comfortable accepting as religion. Churches, mosques, and temples we understand. Confronted with the frantic abandon of the Hindu festival of Holi, however, or the profound silence of a Zen Buddhist sesshin, how many United Methodists, Roman Catholics, or Sunni Muslims would see there a faith as deep as the one they proclaim? Religiously speaking, then, and this is King’s point throughout his work, we barely know where we are, let alone understand where we came from, how we got here, or where we’re going.

As we will see throughout this book, although King regularly uses religious themes and routinely thrusts religious characters onto his storyworld stage, these are only partially intended as commentary. That he detests fundamentalism is clear. Jerry Falwell, for example, he considers “a monster.” But that doesn’t mean that he doesn’t believe in the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism, or the power of single-minded
zealotry. His storyworlds are about religion in that they consistently call into question the incomplete, insular, and self-congratulatory ways we so often imagine the unseen order and our place in it. Over and over, he suggests that things may be vastly different than we suppose. Put differently, Stephen King’s novels and short stories are horror fiction written alongside religion, and emerge from the same place in the human imagination.

For this book, we will stay with the works for which King is most commonly albeit incompletely known: the “scary stories” so disliked by the elderly woman in the Sarasota supermarket. We will focus on his horror fiction, rather than epic fantasy such as The Eyes of the Dragon or his magisterial Dark Tower series, or his ventures into the crime procedural.20 We will also concentrate on his literary works, rather than the various and uneven ways filmmakers and television producers have adapted his novels and short fiction for both the big screen and the small. If fear is the genesis of the human religious imagination, a “subject for which tales of the fantastic were made,” then King’s horror fiction invites us into storyworlds that cut closest to the bones of faith.21 His work in other genres may certainly include scenes that frighten the audience in order to advance the narrative, but King’s scary stories are written explicitly to frighten his Constant Reader. “In the former, fear is a side-effect; in the latter, it is the object of the exercise.”22 Because of this, the dark theologian’s god-talk is read most clearly through the lens of his horror fiction.

Something’s Coming: The Road Ahead

One of the most obvious yet least acknowledged aspects of religious belief and experience is that what we know about reality pales almost to insignificance when compared to what we don’t. No matter how dogmatically religious believers declare the truth of their convictions, theology of any kind remains contingent and conjectural. The first two chapters of this book begin our journey of “thinking religiously” about King’s scary stories. We will grapple with what we think religion means, and with what we fear it might suggest. Because, at the end of the day, “reality is a mystery,” as the tormented N. tells his therapist in the short
story of the same name. “There are places where the cloth gets ragged and reality is thin.”

What presses in on those thin spots, what peeks through the cracks in the world, endlessly intrigues Stephen King, just as it has our ancestors going back hundreds if not thousands of generations. Are human beings the product—or perhaps the by-product—of some ancient alien planetfall (*Dreamcatcher; The Tommyknockers; Under the Dome*)? Does this crack in the world lead to some other, unimaginable dimension (*From a Buick 8; “Mile 81”*)? Or is our world little more than a fragile globe of seeming sanity, surrounded by monstrous and malevolent gods (“N.”; *Revival*)? And, however it happens, when those cracks in the world are forced open, what looks back at us from beyond? What tries to push its way through? And how do we react when it succeeds?

If the religious imagination claims to describe the framework of reality, King’s writing constantly pokes at whatever structure we erect, asking, among other things, How do you know? Where is your evidence? What if you’re wrong? Hidden among these is the question of where the human religious experience, our overwhelming sense that this is not all there is, originates. In this respect, between the seen and the unseen orders, few spots are thinner than the moment of death. Faced with the inevitable prospect of a world in which we are not, how can we do anything but ask, What comes next?

Death is the great and certain mystery. It is the primal experience, the *ur*-fear from which so much of our religious imaginings have evolved and toward which so much of religious belief is directed. What we think about death informs how we think about reality. This is one reason, as King writes in *Just after Sunset*, that “the subject of the afterlife . . . has always been fertile soil for writers who are comfortable with the fantastic.” As the dark theologian, King returns again and again to the question that has haunted hominins since they first realized there was something inescapably different when one of their small clan stopped moving. At their most basic level, after all, religions are ritualized conjectures for answering our questions about death, allaying our fears when it happens, and preparing us for it when the dark rider appears on our own horizon. Horror fiction treads this same path, asking its questions and telling its stories alongside religious myth.
Beginning with the experience of death, chapters 3 and 4 consider not only the origins of religious belief—ghost stories as god-talk—but the ways we pass those beliefs on to our children. That is, how do we go about becoming religious? How we become believers, learn about our faith, and maintain those beliefs in the face of both option and opposition is the problem of religious socialization. Equally important, though, are the lasting effects of this process, the various ways that socialization shapes events that occur even decades later. Once again, these are not stories that settle the issue. They’re not intended as comfort food for the faithful. Rather, they continually remind us of our hunger for answers.

However we acquire them, our religious beliefs come to life through ritual: from the simple act of lighting a candle to the complexity of a Buddhist sand mandala, from the solemnity of High Mass to the riot of Kumbh Mela. Through ritual we embody the great questions of existence. We place them in cosmic context, while grounding them in the circumstances of everyday life. We ritualize life events, locating them in meaningful relationship to both the seen and unseen orders. Through ritual we realize our beliefs, and for decades anthropologists and ritual studies scholars have pointed to the ritual process as one of the principal ways we make our deepest beliefs tangible. Chapters 5 and 6 explore King’s approaches to these key questions of religious experience.

Finally, chapters 7 and 8 return to the big issues of meaning and existence. How we believe “God” acts tells us who (or what) we think “God” is. Picking up various threads of religious experience, King tugs at the question, What if “God” is not there, or what if “God” is there, but just doesn’t give a damn? Which would be worse? What if “God” turned out to be unlike anything we could possibly imagine—or would even want to imagine? These are the questions of theodicy and theology, the justification of God as a function of the nature of God. Two of the most important topics in any system of religious belief, together they raise the central question beating at the heart of all horror fiction: Why is there evil? How do we explain suffering? Why are there monsters? And how do we survive?

“When we discuss monstrosity,” King writes in Danse Macabre, “we are expressing our faith and belief in the norm and watching for the mu-
tant. The writer of horror fiction is neither more nor less than an agent of the status quo.” Historically, religions have been the *sine qua non* of normative agents, in part because they raise questions of normativity in cosmic terms: salvation is at stake, not simply difference; the universe hangs in the balance, not just whether one group triumphs over another. Religions continue, and continue to evolve, because we are rarely satisfied with the answers we get, and those we can imagine rarely survive for long.

Just so our scary stories.